

Feed Me, Spark Me Up

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Category: IT (2017), IT - Stephen King

Genre: Angst, Angst with a Happy Ending, Child Neglect, F/M, Fainting, Friendship, Hurt/Comfort, Implied/Referenced Alcohol Abuse/Alcoholism, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse, M/M, Malnutrition, Mood Swings, Mutual Pining, Period Typical Attitudes, Pining, Richie's parents suck, Smoking, The Losers don't know the extent of what happens in the Tozier household, stozier friendship

Language: English

Characters: Ben Hanscom, Beverly Marsh, Bill Denbrough, Eddie Kaspbrak, Mike Hanlon (mentioned), Richie Tozier, Sonia Kaspbrak (mentioned), Stanley Uris

Relationships: Bill Denbrough/St Stanley Uris, Eddie Kaspbrak/Richie Tozier, Richie Tozier & Stanley Uris

Status: Completed

Published: 2017-11-13

Updated: 2017-11-13

Packaged: 2020-02-01 17:04:18

Rating: Not Rated

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 1

Words: 7,593

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

mal-nour-ished

/mal'nəriSHt/

adjective

suffering from malnutrition.

symptoms:

irritability, apathy, fatigue, dizziness, reduced muscle mass.

(or; The poster of Richie in the film states that he is extremely underweight. It is also canon that his parents are neglectful. This is my take on that + Reddie. Mutual Pining and some good ol' hurt

comfort).

Feed Me, Spark Me Up

Richie Tozier did not talk about his home life.

In the many years that Eddie had known him, the gangly, glasses-clad boy had only brought up his parents a handful of times, and very rarely in a serious manner. Richie was the master of glossing over important topics with jokes, whether to break up tension or to avoid talking about things all together. The Losers often regarded his shenanigans as annoying by-products of his ADHD, but Eddie knew deep down that they were a defence mechanism, just like his own reliance on his inhaler or Ben's tendency to bury himself in books. Richie teased and prodded because he didn't know how else to act and because he didn't like for situations to get too deep lest they scratch the surface of his mask.

Eddie fell for it a lot of the time. It was easy to forget the few bits of information he knew about his best friend's mom and dad when the kid was constantly being a dick or making him laugh until he cried. Eddie spent a good portion of his life wanting to strangle Richie and the other parts wanting to hug the living daylights out of him. Richie was a storm that you were bound to get caught up in, one way or another, but that didn't mean that Eddie didn't still get worried; especially when things were obviously amiss. So, when Richie showed up to their second period history class, looking like a walking ghost, Eddie was rightfully concerned.

Richie was usually either hyper-focused or extremely agitated. He hardly ever sat still and was generally a nuisance to all his teachers, even though he had some of the highest grades in the entirety of their junior year. He was always prepared with a quip or a terrible pun, and never failed to greet his friends with a lude comment or an awful nickname. Eddie, as such, was trained to chew him out automatically, and was gearing up for the inevitable banter that morning, but it

never came. Richie walked right past him and over to his seat near the far window.

Mrs. Carter – their history teacher – had purposely separated them after an incident where Richie's teasing got to be too much. Eddie had retaliated to a rude joke by throwing an eraser at his friend and got his very first high school detention as a result. Since then, Richie had eased up a bit, but he still made sure to say hello and ruffle Eddie's hair or at least wink at him.

Eddie glanced over at Richie in confusion. The Trashmouth was bent over his desk, shoulders slumped. His thick curly hair was even wilder than it normally was, and his expression was vacant. Richie had traded out his coke-bottle lenses a year ago for something a little more practical – something Eddie was secretly bitter about – but the new frames still made his eyes seem a bit larger than normal, and they were only enhancing the deep, dark circles that rested just below them. For once, Richie was perfectly silent and unmoving.

Eddie gulped. Was Richie sick? Oh god, was he contagious? Fuck. How many germs was he carrying? Eddie shook his head. No, he wasn't going to do that right now.

It had been nearly three years since Eddie had discovered the truth about his mother's lies, and while he'd learned to cope without his medication, he still hadn't fully recovered from his hypochondria. There was over a decade of conditioned behaviour to overcome, and old habits die hard. His friends had been incredibly patient with him, especially Richie, who, for all his playful taunts about Eddie being a wuss, never made Eddie feel bad when he couldn't manage a situation. In fact, he was usually the first person to be at Eddie's side when the smaller boy started to have a panic attack, and he was the only one who carried a spare inhaler with him whenever they hung

out (even though logically Eddie knew it didn't help). If Richie could be there for him, Eddie could try to push away his anxieties for his sake.

Just as Eddie was about to call out to the other boy, Mrs. Carter walked into the classroom and clapped for her students' attention. Richie didn't even flinch at the noise, or at the god-awful sound of her chalk screeching against the board. Eddie chewed his lip and turned his head to the front of the room. He'd have to interrogate Richie later.

After worrying his way through Calculus and English, Eddie finally made it to lunch. He'd tried to catch Richie after History, but the kid had booked it before he got the chance. Something was definitely up. Richie was hardly ever so quiet. He zoned out frequently, sure, but it was only when things were particularly bad that he became evasive.

Eddie ran through the week in his head, trying to find any discrepancies in Richie's behaviour, as he walked towards the Losers' regular lunch spot. It was a cheap, graffiti-covered picnic table situated in the far-left corner of the cafeteria, right next to the garbage cans and across from the double doors that led out into the courtyard. The group had picked it for strategic exit purposes, having unfortunately acquired a new set of bullies during Freshman year. Jeffery Bateman and his goons were nowhere near as terrible as the Bower's Gang had been, but they weren't barrels of sunshine either. Their favourite pass time was pushing Eddie into lockers and ripping up Stan's meticulously written notes.

As Eddie approached the table, he saw that most of his friends were already there, chattering away. He watched with an amused grin as Beverly waved her hands wildly back and forth, recounting what must have been a very interesting story. Ben sat next to her nodding his head in dopey-eyed agreement, even as he was dodging her elbow. (The two of them had been inseparable since Bev and her aunt had moved back to Derry the previous year, and it was no secret how hard Ben was still crushing on her). Richie was on her other side, tapping his fingers in a staccato rhythm, while Bill and Stan sat across from them.

“He was such a badass,” Bev exclaimed.

“I-it wasn’t th-that amazing B-Beverly,” Bill said, a blush rising high on his cheeks.

“Are you kidding me? You were so awesome Bill.”

“Why is Bill awesome?” Eddie interrupted, raising his eyebrows.

The Losers all turned to face him, grins spreading onto their faces.

“Heya, Eddie Spaghetti,” Richie said, offering a little wave.

“Don’t call me that, Trashmouth,” Eddie replied on instinct, though he was secretly surprised that Richie was talking to him at all.

Maybe this morning had just been a fluke. Richie didn't exactly *look* better, he was still pale and disheveled, and looked a bit like he'd been run over by a transport truck, but he was also smirking and engaging, so perhaps everything was okay. Maybe Richie just hadn't had enough sleep last night, or hadn't had time for a smoke before class. Maybe Eddie had read into things too much, like he always did, and had gotten worked up over nothing. Whatever the case, he wouldn't push it now, not when Richie seemed to be heading in the right direction.

Eddie nudged Richie over with his hip and plopped down beside him, trying his best not to flush when their hands accidentally brushed. He coughed awkwardly.

"So, what's all this about Bill?"

Beverly's eyes lit up again with excitement. She dropped her apple and leaned to look around Richie.

"Oh, you shoulda seen him Eddie. Jeffery was being an ass, as usual, and he was picking on Stan-"

"He took my Kippah," Stan interjected quietly.

"Yeah, and he made some shitty comment about Stan's dad, and then Bill just came out of nowhere and socked him. Right in the eye."

Eddie blinked.

“Wow. How are you not dead?” he asked, quickly scanning Bill’s body for any injuries.

Bill shrugged his shoulders.

“Mu-miss Johnson c-came out and broke up the f-f-fight before it got b-bad,” he said. “It r-really isn’t that big of a d-deal.”

“Like hell it isn’t,” Bev chimed in. “You were great, I was so proud.”

She pretended to wipe away a tear from her eye.

“Y-yeah, okay,” Bill laughed.

“No really, thank-you,” Stan said, smiling shyly up at the other boy. “I appreciated it.”

The blush returned to Bill’s cheeks in fervour, this time climbing its way up his neck and to the tips of his ears. He bumped his shoulder against Stan’s lightly, and looked down at his lap.

“I honestly didn’t know you had it in you,” Eddie said, taking a bite his sandwich.

Ben hummed in agreement through a mouthful of pasta salad. Beside

him, Richie snorted and shook his head, his long fingers playing with his lighter. He was the only one without food piled in front of him, an occurrence that was far too common for Eddie's liking. Eddie considered offering him his carrots, but he knew Richie didn't really like vegetables.

"Please," Richie said. "As if we didn't all know Big Bill had a mean right hook."

His tone was playful, but there was an edge to it that made Eddie's stomach flip. He side-eyed his best friend warily, and caught Stan doing the same. Bill sighed in annoyance and squared his shoulders.

"Ha ha, R-Rich. Seriously, are you e-ever g-gonna let that go?" he asked.

Richie and Bill had had this argument dozens of times over the last three years. The two had never properly talked about the fight that happened after the group's first visit to Neibolt House, and they only ever referenced it when one of them was looking to get a rise out of the other. Eddie hadn't been present for the event itself, but he had heard the description from more than one of the Losers, and he knew that for some reason it stuck like a thorn in Richie's side.

"What? I was just saying," Richie continued.

He was aiming for nonchalant and failing miserably. The dread from the morning rumbled back up Eddie's sternum, and he found himself scrambling to figure out what was causing yet another swing in Richie's mood.

“Just s-saying what, Rich? C-can’t y-you just drop it? I’ve said s-sorry. Besides, I only p-punched you cause you were b-being an asshole,” Bill said.

“Boys,” Bev warned.

“Oh, I was the asshole?” Richie laughed. It wasn’t a pleasant sound.

“Y-yeah, you were.”

“I wasn’t the one trying to lead us back into a death trap after nearly getting us killed the first time.”

“Beep, beep, Richie.”

A cloud passed over Richie’s eyes at the words, and for a tense moment everything was still. But then as quickly as he had blown up, Richie deflated.

“Yeah, okay, whatever,” he mumbled.

He scrubbed his hand over his face, righted his glasses, and swung a leg over the side of the bench. He stood up and shoved his hands into the pockets of his ratty jean jacket.

“I’ll catch you guys later.”

Eddie turned his body sharply and called after him.

“Wait. Richie where are you going?”

“For a smoke. I’ll see you in class, Eds.”

“Richie.”

But he was already out of the double doors, and making his way to the school’s designated smoking area. Eddie looked back at his friends in confusion.

“What the hell was that about?” Bev asked.

Eddie shook his head.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “He’s been acting weird all day.”

“He seemed fine when he got here,” Ben said.

“W-well hopefully he’ll w-walk it off,” Bill said, running a hand through his hair. “I hate f-fighting with him.”

Eddie met Stan’s gaze across the table. The other boy’s eyes flitted away quickly. *He knew something.*

The remaining Losers chatted quietly until the bell rang, all studiously avoiding the previous altercation. Eventually, they packed up their food and said their goodbyes, promising to meet up at Mike’s place the following day for a movie night. Bev and Ben headed to Chemistry, while Bill left for Geography. Stan went to scamper off after him, but Eddie grabbed his arm gently before he could get far.

Out of everyone, Stanley had changed the most since Pennywise. He was far more withdrawn, and often missed days of school because he was too scared to leave his house. Eddie understood why; he was the only one to have been fed on. Eddie had been hurt by the clown, had had Its sticky fingers on his face, and Its drooling mouth whisper close to his ear, but Bill and Richie had come crashing in to save him before It had a chance to sink Its teeth into him. Stan, on the other hand, had not been so lucky. Eddie tried his best not to treat him like he was made of glass – because God did he know what that felt like and how much it sucked – but he did try to be a little more cautious with what he said.

“Stan, what do you know?” Eddie demanded, softly.

Stan looked up at Eddie nervously, and bit his lip.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“I mean, what do you know about Richie? What’s wrong with him?”
Eddie said.

“What makes you think I know?”

Eddie sighed.

“Because you’ve doing the *look* since he left.”

Stan scrunched up his eyebrows.

“What look?” he sounded mildly affronted.

“The one you do when you know something the rest of us don’t,”
Eddie said.

Stan huffed in amusement.

“So, the look I’m wearing all the time then.”

“This is serious, Stanley,” Eddie whined.

Stan looked between Eddie and the door forlornly. He tapped his foot against the floor three times.

“We’re both gonna be late, Eddie,” he said weakly.

“Then you better hurry up and tell me what you know.”

“Ugh, okay. Fine. Just- look. Richie isn’t having a great time, right now, is all.”

Eddie looked at his friend in bewilderment.

“Yeah, no shit, Stan. Elaborate, please.”

“He’s got a lot on his mind right now, and his parents... well you know how they are.”

Did he? Did Eddie *really* know? Richie barely talked about his family. He made off-handed comments now and again, mostly about his mom’s drinking, or how his dad didn’t like him that much, but apart from that Richie was radio silent on the topic. Eddie had met Maggie and Wentworth Tozier a total of five times over the course his and Richie’s friendship and while none of their interactions had been special, Eddie could clearly remember Richie’s hesitance to have any of his friends stick around the Tozier household for more than twenty minutes. Richie also showed up at Eddie’s window a few times a month to crash on his bedroom floor, but he never offered any explanations as to why, or at least none that were serious.

Aliens have taken over my house, Spaghetti! I can't go back there tonight.

The neighbours are having a party, and I wasn't invited. How rude is that? Making all that noise and not letting me join in on the fun. So, I thought, I guess I'll just have to sleep here, with my cute lil' Eds instead.

Did Richie talk to Stan about these things? He seemed to know what was going on in Richie's head. Why didn't he confide in Eddie? He thought he and Richie were close enough for the Trashmouth to trust him with anything.

"What's on his mind?" Eddie pushed.

Stan glared at the ground in discomfort.

"I can't tell you that, Eddie," he said.

"Why the hell not?"

Eddie's voice came out a little shrill and desperate and he cringed the second the words left his mouth.

"Because they aren't my secrets to share. If you want to know you should ask Richie," Stan said.

“Well, why would he tell you and not me?” Eddie asked, before he could stop himself.

“I’m his best friend too,” Stan said plainly.

He smiled kindly at Eddie, and placed a hand on his shoulder, squeezing it in comfort.

“Look, just talk to him about it, okay? Now, please, let me get to class before I go crazy.”

Eddie smiled back at him, patting his hand.

“Yeah, sorry. You’re right.”

“I’m always right,” Stan said. “See you tomorrow?”

“Wouldn’t miss it.”

He watched Stan walk down the hall, staring at his blonde curls until he rounded the corner and disappeared. Eddie stood numbly for a moment, thoughts of Richie and his stupid smile, and his stupid attitude problems dancing through his head. Why was he like this?

Eddie glanced at his watch and swore under his breath. He was already ten minutes late. His teacher was going to kill him.

Eddie's last class of the day was gym, a subject he hated with every fibre of his tiny being. It probably wouldn't have been as bad if it weren't for the fact that it was a freshman class, one that he should have taken it in his first year like everybody else, but didn't because his overbearing mother refused to let him. He needed at least one gym credit to graduate, and while he didn't enjoy running and lifting – mostly because his lungs weren't used to the strain – he wanted to get his diploma and escape Derry as soon as he possibly could. So, after two years of arguing and a lot of sucking up, Eddie finally convinced Mrs. Kaspbrak to give him the go ahead.

The only thing that made the embarrassment of the whole situation bearable, was that Richie had failed gym not once, *but twice*, and as a result was stuck in the class with him. Eddie knew Richie could have passed if he tried, he aced every other subject, the problem was he just didn't care. He frequently skipped last period just to go smoke, sometimes with Bev, sometimes alone, and even when he was present, he barely put in any effort. He liked track, and basketball, but as soon as weights or football came into the conversation, Richie was gone. He'd fake injuries just to get out of doing sports, and then use it as an excuse to cheer Eddie on obnoxiously from the sidelines. It was totally insufferable, but deep down Eddie kind of liked it. It made him feel special, as well as completely mortified.

Today, Richie had decided to show up, which came as a surprise to Eddie, even though the taller boy had told him he'd be there. Richie had been too unpredictable to read all day, but Eddie was determined to get to the bottom of it. He walked over to his friend, who was stretching on the field, his long arms twisted behind his head.

Richie had grown a lot since they'd started high school, going from a measly five foot three, to a whopping six foot two over the span of only a couple years. Eddie had shot up a few inches too, but had plateaued around five foot seven. (His mom said that she liked him better that way, because she could still tuck him just under her arm, though that thought made Eddie feel a little ill).

Richie had also let his hair get longer, so that it sat just below his ears and touched the tips of his shoulders. His natural curls had come through, making him look shaggier than ever, but also ten times more attractive. He was all gangly limbs, and bony fingers and sharp edges that stuck out at awkward angles, yet he fit into his own body better than most kids their age. Eddie was forever stunned at how good-looking Richie was, and it killed him inside to know that he felt that way. Richie probably never thought about him like that.

Eddie caught his mind wandering as his eyes sought out the bit of skin just below Richie's naval, where his shirt had ridden up. Eddie also found himself slightly concerned at how his best friend's clothes seemed to be sagging off him. He nodded at Richie when the other boy caught sight of him.

"Good of you to finally show up, Eds," he said, casually, as if the incident at lunch hadn't happened.

Eddie scoffed.

"You're one to talk, Rich. You are hardly ever on time."

Richie grinned and shrugged.

“M’here now aren’t I?” he asked.

“Yeah...” Eddie trailed off and fiddled with his hands.

Just ask him. Ask him what’s wrong.

“Richie,” he started.

Behind him, the coach’s whistle blew loud and sharp, startling Eddie enough that he jumped. He felt Richie put a steadying hand on his lower back as their gym teacher began to bark out orders. Heat spread throughout Eddie’s entire body.

“Okay, boys. I want ten laps around the field, starting now.”

Eddie huffed angrily.

“I fucking hate that whistle,” he muttered.

Richie laughed – the asshole.

“C’mon Eddie Spaghetti, you heard the man, let’s get moving.”

He took off ahead, leaving Eddie to chase after him.

“Yo, dickhead, how many times do I have to tell you not to call me that?” he called.

“Aw, but Eds, you look so cute when you’re angry. I just can’t help myself,” Richie teased.

“I hate you,” Eddie said, finally catching up and matching his pace with his friend’s.

“That’s not what your mom said last night-”

Eddie punched him in the arm. They jogged in amicable silence for a few minutes before Eddie got up the courage to attempt a more serious conversation again.

“Hey, Rich?” he asked.

Richie hummed in response.

“What’s wrong with you?”

Richie barked out a surprised chuckle, whipping his head to the side. He sounded a bit like a hyena.

“Well, that’s a loaded question my dear, Eds,” he said.

“No, really Richie, what’s going on? You’ve been off all day. First with the silent treatment in the morning, and then the whole thing with Bill. What’s wrong?”

Richie glanced at him, his eyes wide beneath his specs. He started running a little harder.

“Nothing’s wrong, Eddie,” he said.

“Bullshit,” Eddie bit out, angry now. “Don’t lie to me, Richie.”

“I’m not lying.”

“Yes, you are. You think I don’t see how exhausted you look? You’re my best friend, Rich. I know when something is up.”

“It’s not a big deal, Eds.”

“Don’t call me that. Why won’t you tell me? You told Stan, so why can’t you tell me?”

Richie was moving at an even faster pace, his legs and arms pumping more violently by the second. Eddie was struggling to keep up, but he didn’t want to back down from the argument.

“Because Stan is different, okay?” Richie said, pissed now as well. “It’s not the same with him as it is with you.”

Hurt coursed through Eddie’s chest, hot and stinging. Stan was different. He was better, he was smarter, he was more important, he was-

Eddie’s thoughts were abruptly cut off, because suddenly Richie was pitching forward and grasping his knees with shaking hands. Eddie watched in mild horror as his best friend swayed on the spot, his cheeks going ice-white, before tumbling onto the ground with a thud. Eddie was down beside him in a second, hands flitting anxiously around the other boy’s face.

“Richie,” he said. “Richie, wake up.”

Richie remained unresponsive, his limbs heavy and his head lolled to the side. Eddie screamed for help, feeling around Richie’s neck for a pulse. He located it quickly and breathed a momentary sigh of relief when it pounded steadily against his fingers. In his peripheral vision, Eddie watched their gym teacher kneel beside him.

“What happened?” he asked, urgency leaking into his voice.

“I don’t know,” Eddie said. “We were running, and then he just passed out.”

He could feel tears gathering in the corners of his eyes. This was one of his worst nightmares, the kind that played on a loop in his mind when the clown came back to torment him in his sleep. Richie, unconscious, covered in blood. Richie, dead. *No, no he’s not dead, his heart is beating*, he reminded himself.

Eddie took Richie’s face in his hands and tapped it lightly.

“C’mon Richie, wake up,” he whispered. “Wake up, *you asshole*. Don’t do this to me.”

He could feel his chest constrict with panic. The familiar sensation of an asthma attack started to overtake Eddie’s body, and he began to wheeze. He needed his inhaler, he would hyperventilate without it. Eddie felt stupid, he shouldn’t have to rely on the dumb thing anymore, it was all fake, but he couldn’t help it. Anxiety was making him nauseous, building bigger and bigger the longer Richie’s eyes remained closed. The tears were blurring Eddie’s vision, a few slipping out and running down the tip of his nose. He stroked his thumb along Richie’s cheekbone discreetly, afraid that the teacher would see, but also desperate to touch, desperate to comfort.

“Richie, please,” he tried again.

Slowly, and with difficulty, Richie's eyelids fluttered open, and his gaze focused blearily on Eddie. He squinted against the midday sun and lifted a hand to catch Eddie's wrist loosely.

"What happened?" he groaned.

Eddie laughed despite himself, his breath hitching.

"You jackass. You scared the shit out of me."

"Hey, language, Mr. Kaspbrak," the coach scolded, before turning his attention to Richie.

"You passed out and took a spill kid. We're gonna get you up and to the nurse, okay?"

Richie tried to nod but he looked like a rag doll flopping around in the grass. The coach hefted him up and brought him to his feet. Eddie slipped an arm around Richie's waist to steady him. The boy's long legs were trembling like Jell-O.

"Can you get him to the office okay, Kaspbrak?"

"Yes, sir."

“All right, get outta here.”

The coach waved his hand and jogged back over to the crowd of students that had gathered nearby, peering over each other to see what all the fuss was about. Eddie grimaced under the still mostly dead-weight of his friend.

“If you pass out on me again, I will kill you,” he said softly.

Richie snorted.

“No promises.”

Eddie paced nervously around the nurse’s office, his eyes flicking to the clock just above the door. They’d been waiting for twenty minutes for an adult to come in and inspect Richie, and Eddie’s mind was reeling through all the information on concussions and loss of consciousness he’d collected over the years. There were a thousand possibilities and many of them ended in death. If somebody didn’t arrive soon, Eddie was going to vomit from nerves.

The room was more of a glorified closet than an office, with one miserable cot and a small table taking up most of the available space. There were also a few cupboards, overstuffed with supplies, and a rather morbid looking poster on the wall, screaming about the dangers of AIDS in a bright red font. Eddie tried his best not to look at it.

Across from him, Richie sat stiffly on the bed, his string-bean limbs dangling off the edge. He looked a bit ridiculous, hunched over on the tiny thing. It reminded Eddie of that scene in *Alice in Wonderland*, where Alice had sprouted up and become too large for the White Rabbit's house; only with a much gawkier, hairier version of her. Richie's leg bounced up and down furiously, a restless tic that always meant the glasses-clad boy was overthinking. It took all of Eddie's willpower not to reach out and stop him as the appendage repeatedly whacked against the base of the bed.

Finally, the door opened, revealing Derry High's resident nurse, Ms. Meriwether – a stout, round lady with pleasant features. She smiled warmly at Eddie. He visited her at least twice a month, much to his own disdain, but he couldn't help the residual worry that still permeated his being when it came to any sort of sickness or injury. Ms. Meriwether was kind enough not to point out that Eddie really didn't need to come see her as often as he did, she knew he was aware.

"Mr. Kaspbrak," she said, brightly. "How are you feeling today, sweetheart?"

Eddie blushed and looked down at his muddy sneakers.

"I-I'm fine, ma'am. We're actually here because of him," he said jabbing his thumb at Richie, who gave her a little wave.

"Ah," she said, walking over. "Mr. Tozier. What seems to be the trouble? More fights with Jeffery Bateman?"

Richie winced.

“Uh... no, not- not today,” he said. “I just-”

“He passed out,” Eddie cut in, crossing his arms over his chest.

Ms. Meriwether raised her eyebrows, and placed a hand over Richie’s forehead. Richie flinched at the touch and bit his lip.

“Well, you don’t seem to have a fever, love,” she said. “Have you been feeling dizzy at all?”

Richie shrugged.

“Right before I hit the ground, yeah,” he said bluntly.

Ms. Meriwether hummed. She shuffled behind him and poked at his back gently.

“Alright, can you take a deep breath for me?”

Richie did as he was told. A look passed over the nurse’s face, and Eddie felt his heart climb up his throat.

“Mr. Tozier, could I get you to step onto the scale for me?” Ms. Meriwether asked, gesturing to a worn contraption in the right-hand corner of the room.

Richie visibly paled, and Eddie briefly thought that he might faint again. He didn't. Instead he stood up carefully and followed the nurse's instructions. He diligently avoided Eddie's gaze the whole time, favouring the jar of cotton swabs instead. Ms. Meriwether made a thoughtful noise as she slid the counter weight across the beam.

“Alright, Richie, you can step off,” she said.

She paused and waited for Richie to sit again, before continuing.

“Mr. Tozier, when was the last time you ate?”

Richie twitched, hands shifting into fists that looked tight enough to hurt. Eddie watched his best friend closely.

“At lunch,” Richie said, not looking up.

Eddie blinked. That was a bold-faced lie. They both knew that he hadn't had anything to eat. Hell, he hardly ever ate lunch. Richie never seemed to have food with him at school, save the odd bag of chips, or a chocolate bar that he'd stole from the vending machine. He always claimed that he was just forgetful, which wasn't difficult

for the Losers to believe, considering Richie's mouth and mind were constantly all over the place.

"Are you sure?" Ms. Meriwether pushed.

"Yeah," Richie nodded. "Eddie was there, he saw me. Right, Eds?"

Eddie glared at the other boy. *Don't drag me into whatever this is.* But Richie's eyes were big and pleading, and Eddie was such a sucker when it came to Richie that he found himself nodding along.

"Yeah," he said dumbly.

Ms. Meriwether didn't look convinced, but both she and Eddie knew she wasn't going to get anything out of Richie, no matter how many times she asked. The nurse sighed, her pretty mouth turning down into a frown.

"Okay, well, then I would say that you are simply dehydrated. You probably didn't have enough to drink before running. Just get some fluids in you and take it easy, and you should be fine."

Richie hopped off the bed and rubbed his hands down the legs of his jeans.

"So, I'm in the clear then?" he asked.

“Yes, you are free to go. Unless you would like me to call your parents to come pick you up-”

“That won’t be necessary,” Richie said quickly. “I just gotta walk it off.”

He winked at Ms. Meriwether and offered her a salute before grabbing Eddie’s arm and sauntering towards the door.

“Thanks a bunch, Ms. M,” he called.

She said something in return, but the boys were already halfway down the hallway by the time she finished, and her voice was immediately suffocated by the dozens of other students mingling in the hall. Eddie trailed clumsily behind Richie, tripping over his own feet in a daze.

“Slow down, Trashmouth. Did you not hear her? She told you to take it easy,” Eddie grunted.

Richie didn’t respond, just kept marching in the direction of the school’s front entrance. He only stopped once they had stepped out into the cool autumn air and reached the sign that read ‘Derry High’ on the front lawn. He pulled out a pack of Marlboros and lit one, letting go of Eddie’s arm. The two stood in silence, watching smoke pour out of the taller boy’s mouth.

“Rich,” Eddie croaked out after Richie had finished his first cigarette and started on a second.

“Yeah, Eds?”

“Tell me what’s going on. And don’t lie to me, okay? I don’t want an argument. Just be fucking honest with me.”

Richie looked at him, tiredly, all traces of a fight gone from his freckled face. He sighed.

“What do you wanna know?”

What do I wanna know? Eddie thought. I wanna know why you’ve been so distant, I wanna know why you look like death warmed over. I wanna know why your ribs stick out of your skin, or why you won’t talk to me about whatever has been bothering you. I wanna know if you get all warm inside when you’re around me, like I do with you, or if you think of me when you’re scared or-

Eddie pinched the bridge of his nose and shook his head. Start with something simple.

“When was the last time you actually ate? And don’t give me the bullshit answer you gave Ms. Meriwether.”

Richie looked down at his nails. They were red and raw from being

picked at and had started to bleed in a few places. He chewed on his bottom lip.

“Uh, yesterday. I think,” he said.

Eddie’s eyes grew wide with disbelief.

“You think?” he asked incredulously.

“Y-yeah? Yeah. I remember eating yesterday.”

“What time yesterday?”

Richie scrunched up his nose in thought, making him look like a confused bunny. Eddie would have found it adorable if he hadn’t been so concerned about where the conversation was going.

“Like, five? Maybe six.”

“Richie,” Eddie said, horrified. “That was like twenty-two hours ago.”

Richie scuffed the ground with his shoe and shrugged.

“Why the fuck haven’t you eaten anything?” Eddie asked.

Richie wouldn’t meet his eyes, and it seemed like he was weighing his options, trying to decide whether or not it was worth telling Eddie the truth.

“Cause- ah shit, Eds,” he said, tilting his head back. “I only had one box of mac n’ cheese left, and I kinda ate it for dinner last night.”

Eddie ran the sentence through his head a couple times, trying to grasp the implications of what Richie was saying, but it still didn’t quite compute. He looked at his friend quizzically.

“Okay, so why didn’t you have something else? Nobody eats mac n’ cheese for breakfast anyway.”

Richie’s expression did something complicated before going carefully neutral.

“Because there wasn’t any other food in the house.”

His words were dull and devoid of emotion. Eddie’s brain struggled to put the pieces together.

“What do you mean? You’re telling me there was absolutely no food – none what so ever – in your house?” he asked.

“Well, I mean if you count booze, crackers and olives, then sure, I guess there was food,” Richie said, throwing his hands in the air. “But mum gets upset when I eat the olives, cause she likes to have them for cocktails, and there are only so many saltines one man can eat.”

Eddie gaped at him.

“Doesn’t your mom ever cook dinner, or buy groceries?”

“She forgets to sometimes,” Richie said, nonchalantly.

Stop doing that, Eddie thought. *Stop acting like this is okay.*

“What about your dad?” Eddie tried, feeling the tight knot of dread in his gut coil tighter and tighter.

Richie shrugged again, flicking the ash from his cigarette.

“Dad’s never really home. He eats at the office most of the time. And when he is around... I just sorta stay out of his way. I make him mad, a lot. Guess I get on his nerves.”

Richie let out a self-deprecating laugh that had Eddie inching closer to him. This was one of those times that the smaller boy wanted to wrap his arms around the Trashmouth and never let go.

How long had this been going on? He knew things at the Tozier’s

weren't great, but he never thought it had been this bad.

"What do you mean he gets mad? Does he-" Eddie choked on his words, not wanting to think about it being true. "Does he hurt you?"

Richie's big brown eyes finally found his. He wasn't crying, but there was a shine to them that hadn't been there earlier.

"Well, I mean he doesn't *hit* me, exactly. He just gets up in my face and sometimes shoves me around a bit."

He took one last drag of his cigarette and then ground it out against the stone Derry High sign. His fingers danced along a patch of his hip absently.

"He never leaves marks, or anything, except for once when he pushed me a little too hard and I jammed my side into our kitchen counter. I had a pretty nasty bruise after that one."

He glanced at Eddie.

"But it's not a big deal."

"Not a big deal? Are you kidding me, Richie? How can you say that? Of course, it's a big deal. Your parents aren't feeding you, and your dad is knocking you around. That's not normal."

He felt like screaming when Richie looked away, ashamed, as if he was the one to blame. This wasn't his fault. Richie was loud and annoying and drove Eddie crazy, but he was also loyal and kind and so full of love that it was blinding at times. Eddie loved him. Eddie was *in love* with him, and it hurt to see him falling apart.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Eddie asked.

"I didn't want you to worry."

"Stan said you had a lot on your mind, was this what it was?"

Richie chuckled and hugged himself.

"Nah, this is just my life, Eds. I'm used to it."

Eddie's heart lurched at how twisted that sounded.

"Well what else then?" he asked.

Richie looked up from under long lashes and shook his head minutely.

“I can’t tell you, Eddie” he whispered.

Eddie’s anger bubbled over, sending shockwaves of frustration through him.

“Why not, Rich? How come you don’t trust me?”

A voice in the back of his head told him not to take his desperation out on Richie, but it was being drowned out by his own helplessness and desire to understand.

Richie flinched.

“I do trust you, Eds,” he said meekly.

“Do you? If that’s true then why do you keep closing yourself off? Stan seems to be in the know, but none of the rest of us are.”

“I told you it’s different.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t feel the same way about Stan as I do about you!”

Richie was yelling now, his stance defensive and jittery. He groaned and tugged at his curls. Eddie stood dumbfounded and unsure, the situation having spiralled further out of his control than anticipated. He felt like crying.

“I get that Stan is your best friend,” he said, quieter. “I just thought I was too.”

Richie’s face was pinched in anguish, his brow furrowed with stress lines and the bags under his eyes stark purple against his creamy complexion. God, Eddie had just made everything worse.

“Eddie, you are, but it’s not- I don’t like Stan the way I like you.”

Richie moved closer to Eddie so that their toes were almost touching. Eddie could hear how ragged and wet his breath was, and wondered briefly if Richie had even registered it.

“Eddie- I just don’t want you to hate me.”

“I could never hate you, Rich,” Eddie whispered.

Richie grabbed the smaller boy’s hands and turned them over in his. Richie’s fingers were warm and rough, the opposite of Eddie’s, which were baby-soft due to obsessive moisturizing (his mother had ingrained that into him).

“Eddie, I like you,” Richie said.

“Yeah, I like you too, dipshit.”

“No, no Eds, I mean I *like you*, like you,” Richie closed his eyes. “Might even love you.”

He said the last part so softly that Eddie might have missed it were it not for their close proximity. The words rang clear in Eddie’s ears and eyes shot up to Richie’s in a flash. His heart stuttered in his chest.

“Wh-what?”

“Look, Eddie, please don’t freak out, okay? I know it isn’t exactly ideal. I’m probably the last person you’d ever want to have a crush on you, but I can’t help it. I’ve been losing a ton of sleep over this. I’ve been going to Stan because he- he understands. I mean, we both know how head over heels he is for Bill, he’s shit at hiding it.”

Richie was rambling, like he always did when he got scared. Eddie tried to interrupt, but the other boy powered on.

“A-and like you said he is my best friend. And you are too, I swear you are, but I just can’t really think straight around you – no pun intended – and I haven’t known how to act since I figured it out. I don’t want to make you uncomfortable, and I know you might think it’s gross because I’m a boy. Like even though we all said it was okay when Stan came out, I know it’s totally different when a guy actually

has a crush on you and-”

Eddie cut him off by grabbing his collar and pulling him down to press their lips together. Richie made a surprised noise against his mouth, but let himself be tugged forward. It wasn't exactly how Eddie had imagined his first kiss – in his dreams, there had been fewer sweaty gym clothes and more stars – but it was sort of perfect none the less. Richie melted into the kiss after a few seconds, his hands coming up to cup either side of Eddie's face. He tasted like nicotine and salt, a combination that would have been gross in any other circumstance, but in the moment, it was heavenly. After years of pent up longing, kissing Richie Tozier felt like coming home and flying away all at the same time.

Eventually they pulled back, breathing heavily.

“Wow, Eddie Spaghetti, you kiss even better than your mom does,” Richie said, smirking.

Eddie smacked him on the arm, but he couldn't keep the grin off his face.

“You are such an asshole, Tozier,” he laughed.

“So, I take it you feel the same way then?” Richie asked.

There was the tiniest bit of insecurity in his voice that made Eddie's heart warm all over again.

“Yeah, Richie, I feel the same.”

“You aren’t mad?”

“At your parents? Yeah,” Eddie said, turning serious again.

He trailed his thumb over Richie’s freckles, revelling in the way the other boy leaned into the touch.

“But not at you, no.”

Richie let out a rattling sigh and brought their foreheads together.

“Okay,” he said.

“Okay,” Eddie echoed, bumping their noses. “Now what do you say we get out of here? School ended like half an hour ago.”

Richie laughed.

“Geez, I didn’t even notice. That was brave of you, kissing me out in the open like that.”

Eddie blushed and quickly whipped his head around, looking to see if they had an audience.

“Crap. I wasn’t thinking about that. I was just trying to get you to shut up,” he teased.

“Oh ho, Eddie Gets Off A Good One,” Richie exclaimed, pumping his fist like an idiot. “But I wouldn’t worry Spaghetti Head, no one was around to see us necking.”

“Will you ever stop with the stupid nicknames?”

“Never.”

Eddie shook his head in fond exasperation.

“Look, I just don’t want Jeffery to have more ammunition to use against us, you know? We’ll have to be careful.”

Richie waggled his eyebrows suggestively.

“That was in the future tense,” he said.

“So, it was,” Eddie said.

“Does that mean you are interested in more necking?”

“Maybe if you stop calling it that.”

Richie smiled big and bright, some of the light that had been missing all day returning to his features. He laced his and Eddie’s hands together.

“What does that make us, then?” he asked.

“Boyfriends?” Eddie suggested. “That’s what you call it when you go out with a boy, right? Even if it’s two guys?”

“Yeah,” Richie said, tenderly. “Boyfriends is good.”

“Well, okay then, *boyfriend*,” Eddie said, a giggle escaping him. God, he was so screwed. “How about we grab some food?”

Richie’s expression was softer than he’d ever seen, a thousand thank-yous poured into a single gaze. He pressed his lips to Eddie’s again; once, twice, three times, before tugging at their intertwined fingers.

“Lead the way, El Capitan,” he said in a terrible accent.

Both boys laughed.

Later, when the two were stuffed full of curly fries and were walking back to Eddie's place to listen to music and make-out, Eddie made a promise to himself that no matter what happened, no matter how shitty Richie's household got, Eddie would always make sure that Richie knew he had a home in him.